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A Tribute to Professor Jonathan Rohr

MELANIE LESLIE[†]

I was fortunate to know Jonathan as a student, faculty colleague, and friend. Jonathan and I had much in common: we were both Cardozo graduates with backgrounds in music and performance who started our academic careers as Visiting Assistant Professors at our alma mater. So, Jonathan was very special to me. Although our common backgrounds were the foundation of our bond, he was singularly remarkable—a young man whose life touched so many and whose achievements only begin to express his extraordinary talents.

Jonathan was a brilliant student. Cardozo faculty members remember his inexhaustible work ethic and thoughtful, calm brilliance. But mostly, his professors recollect his warmth and empathy. As Professor Eva Hanks put it, “he made me a better teacher. When I was preparing for class, I envisioned him sitting there, taking it all in, and I knew that if his hand went up, I might be in trouble. I made sure I was ready.” Professor Stewart Sterk remembers Jonathan as a wonderful combination of “super smart and really humble . . . he was driven to be the best he could be.”

Jonathan graduated from Cardozo in 2009, *summa cum laude* and first in his class. He was the senior editor of the law review, the recipient of the Louis D. Brandeis Award for academic performance and the Felix Frankfurter Award for outstanding academic achievement, diligence and judgment. He received the Benjamin N. Cardozo Writing Award for the best written work for civil advocacy, and was a Dean’s Distinguished Scholar and a member of the Order of the Coif.

As a practicing lawyer, Jonathan adhered to the highest ethical standards. In confidential conversations about ethical issues, he revealed himself to be a trustworthy, deeply principled attorney. I was so proud to call him a Cardozo graduate, and he made me proud to be a lawyer.

In 2015, Jonathan accepted a position at Cardozo as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Law. His former professors were not surprised: Jonathan had always seemed destined to enter the academy, as his was a curious and engaged intellect. He taught Contracts and Corporations to nearly 200 students during his two-year tenure, and he made it look easy! Jonathan prepared diligently for class, able to master a vast amount of material in a brief amount of time. But he focused much attention on the classroom component—seeking ways to keep the students engaged, to make the classroom a locus of discussion and debate, and serve as a mentor and role model for a new generation of learners. As a Professor, Jonathan was demanding but kind; his students knew that he had high expectations, and

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they were devoted to making him proud. Jonathan poured everything he had into teaching, and they loved him for it.

Jonathan was a multi-faceted, open-minded, and sophisticated person who embraced life's pleasures with passion—he loved art, literature, food and, most of all, music—all kinds, not just classical music, at which he excelled. Law professors can be an eccentric crowd, but Jonathan's love of music was no affectation or pretention. Richard Weisberg, a Cardozo professor and law and literature scholar, shared this email that Jonathan wrote to him:

I've been thinking a lot about Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* and, in particular, the way that contract and law are used and portrayed throughout. A contractual dispute between Figaro and Marcellina drives much of the plot, and it is only through the resolution of this dispute that the path is cleared for Susanna and Figaro to get married. We also see the Count attempt to manipulate the legal situation to his advantage, and then to top it off, there's an aria (that Mozart sets in the buffo style) in which Bartolo, a lawyer, talks about scouring the entire legal code to find arguments that will let him get revenge (by helping Marcellina in her contractual dispute).

I could see myself writing a piece on this at some point. [How we all wish he had].

When a senior member of our faculty confided that she didn't "get" a piece of modern music, Jonathan counseled her—"Don't struggle," he said. "Just open yourself up and let it come to you." His openness and passion for beauty was infectious, and we were all touched by it.

As a young scholar, Jonathan was hungrily curious and utterly without pretense. He *asked* questions and he *listened* to answers. He was constantly learning, and he was honest and excited about that fact. Jonathan's mind was exceptionally curious. When confronted with an interesting legal issue, he would turn it over in his mind, examining it from all angles, thinking through the possibilities. And, once he processed information, Jonathan had an uncanny ability to distill the complexities into simple digestible ideas and solutions. His work was thoughtful and thorough, his writing style fluid and graceful. Jonathan was quickly blossoming into a premier private law scholar, with an emphasis on complex and innovative commercial transactions. It was clear to us all that he was on the cusp of a brilliant and impactful academic career.

Jonathan was a gifted professor, wonderful husband, generous colleague, and devoted friend. He was loved by all who knew him. He went above and beyond in all facets of his professional life. He was a true pleasure to work with. All of us at Cardozo Law School were honored to call Jonathan a colleague and a friend. The world has lost a unique mind. He will be greatly missed.

Henry David Thoreau said, "On the death of a friend, we should consider that the fates through confidence have devolved on us the task of a double living, that we have henceforth to fulfill the promise of our friend's life also, in our own, to the world."

Those of us who are better for knowing Jonathan must endeavor to fulfill the promise of Jonathan's life. He will live on when we take the time to meet with a student even though we are up against a writing deadline; when we take an ethical stand even at great personal cost; when we delight in being swept away by an idea, alone or in conversation with a colleague; when we are true to ourselves—enthusiastically and unapologetically—and when, surrendering to the beauty of the moment, we let the music come to us.

He has touched us, he has changed us, and we will strive not let him down.

MELANIE WILSON[†]

Some people are gifted. Jonathan Rohr was among them. Jonathan spent only one year at the University of Tennessee College of Law, but his impact on me, my colleagues, our students, and the staff was as powerful as his baritone voice.

I first met Jonathan in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 2016, when he interviewed for a faculty position in business law. Jonathan entered our interview suite, smiled warmly, shook my hand, and sat on the edge of the candidate “hot seat” with a look of enthusiasm. From the first two minutes, I was confident that he would be a good fit at Tennessee. By the end of our twenty-five minutes together, Jonathan was a unanimous favorite of the search committee. That theme—a unanimous favorite—continued for Jonathan's all-too-short time in our community. Jonathan connected with each of us because of his love for teaching, his respect for students, his talent for writing, his scholarly promise, and his genuine affection for the law.

During student orientation, Jonathan established a rapport with the anxious first-years, managing to position himself in the middle of them during receptions and on the night of the 1L dinner. He shared stories, actively listened to theirs, and laughed freely with them—like old friends do. Jonathan also built close collegial relationships with a team of upper-level students when he coached them for a transactional law competition. The team expressed intense gratitude for his mentorship. It was his way. It was his pattern. Jonathan effortlessly created relationships with each of us. He made us feel special.

Jonathan enriched lives. He lifted spirits. His dedicated and thoughtful teaching gave students hope and built confidence. And, his singing commanded introspection, deep contemplation, and admiration. Jonathan was so smart, so loved, so likable, and so warm. Words are inadequate. We miss him deeply. His influence lives on.

[†] Dean and Lindsay Young Distinguished Professor of Law, University of Tennessee College of the Law.

GREGORY M. STEIN[†]

Sadly, I enjoyed the pleasure of being a colleague of Jonathan Rohr's for only about a year. He was an extraordinarily warm and engaging colleague: always overflowing with ideas and new ways of looking at things. Because his office was just a few doors away from mine, we had many of these chats. I enjoyed every one of our conversations, and I always ended up thinking about familiar topics in different ways after our discussions.

I was particularly struck by Jonathan's willingness to engage with me about my own scholarship. I always consider it a promising sign when a new colleague wants to talk about his or her own work, as it shows that they are wrestling deeply with their subject and want to get perspectives from other people. Some new professors are quite happy to circulate manuscripts or just talk informally, while others are more reluctant, perhaps out of concern about exposing incomplete work to fellow professors who might be disappointed in it during its early stages (and will, of course, be voting on their tenure soon enough). But it is rare for someone so new to the academy also to want to discuss a fellow professor's scholarship with them. They are very busy during those first few years, and it is quite reasonable to be reluctant to offer.

This past May, I presented a work-in-progress to the UT law faculty in advance of a conference presentation I would be giving soon afterwards. Jonathan attended, asked great questions, offered some supportive suggestions, and then followed up with me afterwards. Most impressively, after several email exchanges, he offered to read my manuscript. In his email, he specifically expressed concern that it might be presumptuous of him to ask. I did not think it presumptuous at all. Mostly, I was surprised at his kindness in being willing to undertake a long and potentially dull read of an incomplete work. I ultimately told Jonathan that I would be happy to send him a copy when it was ready, and that I knew it would benefit from his comments, but that he should absolutely not read it if it would be a burden.

I am sorry that I will not get to hear what Jonathan would have had to say. Obviously, my sadness goes far, far beyond this, and the loss I am suffering is minute compared to the unimaginable grief felt by his family and close friends. But in addition to my sorrow at losing such a wonderful colleague way too soon, I had an extra reminder when I sent off the manuscript recently, thinking about the great, creative suggestions that Jonathan would have offered, most likely over a beer—probably a new sour that he would have recommended—at the Casual Pint.

[†] Woolf, McClane, Bright, Allen & Carpenter Distinguished Professor of Law, University of Tennessee College of Law.

JOAN MACLEOD HEMINWAY[†]

Much has been and will be related about Jonathan's amazing abilities in so many areas of endeavor. This is entirely appropriate; those abilities are a critically important part of who he was. But at the moment I write this, I am most struck by the powerful emotions associated with his fleeting but beautiful and impactful presence in my life.

As a result, and with admiration for Jonathan's respect for cultural difference and inclusion, I choose to leave a tribute to him in the form of a haiku.

Like a warm spring breeze,
He drifted into our lives.
He left as he came.

Before he died, Jonathan knew I soon would be taking my first trip to Japan. He was enthusiastic and excited about my journey. Haiku also seems like an appropriate form for my tribute for this reason.

I appreciate the opportunity to honor Jonathan's life in this way. I hope that others who knew him for a relatively brief time or in a limited aspect also will feel the echo of his strong emotional pull when they read this short verse.

BRIANA ROSENBAUM[†]

Jonathan's death has been devastating to all of us—his loss leaves a gaping hole in our institution and in my heart that simply will not ever be filled.

The more I reflect on his time here, however, the more I have the kind of hope for the future that Jonathan would have wanted us to have. What is giving me that hope? The fact that we, as a College and as an academy, hire people like Jonathan. People who are both critical thinkers and who care deeply about those around them. No matter the issue, whether emotion-laden, or seemingly more mundane, Jonathan always demonstrated an equal level of commitment to the human and to the intellectual. One example is our discussions on formative assessments. His passion for the topic, and its ability to be harnessed for student growth, truly struck me. Jonathan thought professors should tackle assessments critically, by ensuring that they are pedagogically sound and actually helpful to the students, and humanistically, by using assessment as a means of connecting *with* students (as opposed to offering something *to* them).

But, importantly, Jonathan did not just talk the talk. He was purposeful about his teaching choices, with the intent of both guiding his students and

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[†] Associate Professor of Law, University of Tennessee College of Law.

working alongside them, all in an effort to connect with them and help them learn. In this way, it always seemed to me that he saw his teaching role as akin to a team-leader, rather than a supervisor. His students confirm that this is what they experienced. Eli Lovingfoss, a student in his Business Associations class, explains that Jonathan's practice tests and substantial feedback helped him gauge his own learning and ensured that he understand the material. He also connected with the students personally while mentoring professionally. As Eli explains, "when I met with Professor Rohr about the assignments, he used the opportunity not only to discuss the material but used it as a gateway to get to know me as a person. There was never any doubt after I met with Professor Rohr that he cared about his students beyond just their academic lives." Considering Jonathan's clear collaborative learning approach and commitment to his students, it's no wonder that he became a favorite professor in just one year here at the University of Tennessee.

Going forward, my commitment to Jonathan is to strive to do as he did: to truly connect with people, one-on-one and in the community, and apply critical-thinking principles to all three academic "pillars" (teaching, service, and scholarship). To Jonathan's family and friends: thank you for giving us the gift of Jonathan. We treasure it.

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE COLLEGE OF LAW STUDENTS[†]

The first time I ever saw Professor Rohr, I thought he was a 1L. He seemed too approachable and relatable to be a professor and too well-rested and enthusiastic to be an upper classman. While I would later learn that he was indeed a professor, I also learned that he was approachable, relatable, and enthusiastic. That is what made him such a great professor and such a wonderful person. Professor Rohr was enthusiastic about everything he did and he always gave one hundred percent to his students; his door never shut and his calendar never too full. Lauren Hughes, a student of Professor Rohr, states that when she first met with him, she was considering a career change. In a conversation that would span an afternoon, Professor Rohr would introduce Lauren to the intersection between law and technology and reinvigorate her desire for an innovation-driven career. That was just the person Professor Rohr was, he would give up his time to help his students at the drop of a hat. He touched each of our lives in a profound way and we are better scholars, lawyers, and people for having known him.

[†] A group of students worked collaboratively to create this tribute, which is intended to be representative of the larger student body.

AARON WRIGHT[†]

Jonathan was a wonder, both personally and professionally. Over the past year or so, I had the pleasure to get to know Jonathan as a person and as a scholar through our work on *Blockchain-Based Token Sales, Initial Coin Offerings, and the Democratization of Public Capital Markets*, as well as related scholarship.

Jonathan's mind was exceptionally curious. When he saw a problem, he would tackle it head on, examining a legal problem from all angles. Once processed, Jonathan had an uncanny ability to distill down complex topics into simple digestible ideas and solutions.

Jonathan used his skill to help us take one of the most complex and vexing problems facing securities regulators around the globe and provide a coherent taxonomy, along with tangible solutions for law makers and regulators as we move towards a world where assets travel freely like email.

Beyond Jonathan's talents as a scholar, he was a gifted professor and widely loved by his students. He had a theatrical bent, a commanding presence, and went above and beyond in all facets of his professional life—a true pleasure.

I feel honored to call Jonathan a colleague and a friend. The world lost a unique mind. He will be greatly missed.

[†] Associate Clinical Professor of Law, Founder/Director Tech Startup Clinic, Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Yeshiva University.